

# THE 'WHY' OF LIGHTING

A question I often get asked by photographers is, 'Why should I learn off-camera flash if I'm happy and comfortable using my flash on-camera?' This is an excellent question, and, admittedly, one that I struggle to answer

Now this isn't because I can't think of a reply, but rather that I find it hard to put into words a reply that is best given visually. Aside from the practicality and portability of using small flashes for lighting, the thing I love most about off-camera flash (OCF) is that it has taught me to understand and love light. Because of this I have been able to bridge the gap that exists between

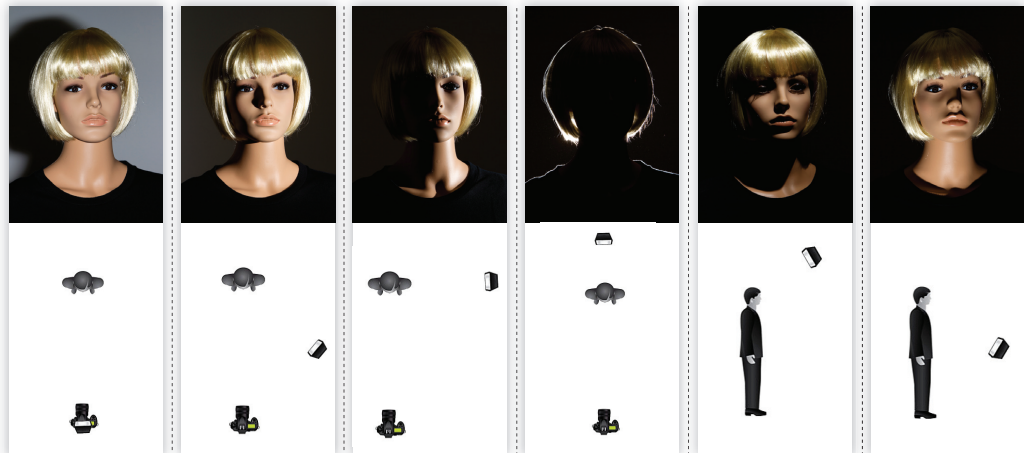
shooting in whatever conditions ambient light allows me and creating an image deliberately.

I believe that light is a language and with understanding and experience it can be a very eloquent and powerful form of expression. From a photographic point of view, the characteristics of light, as well as those of the surfaces it touches, are all things to consider when lighting an image.

This is an article about light and the characteristics of light that matter to photographers. In part, it is also a visual answer to the question regarding the need to learn off-camera lighting. I hope this information is illuminating (pun definitely intended), and that it spurs you on to pursue your own love affair with the language of light.

## Light has direction

Each of the images to the right has been lit with the same light source (a bare speedlight). Changing the position of the light has resulted in very dramatic differences between each of the images. Each of them has a different emotive quality, which is important to think about if you're aiming to convey a feeling in your image.

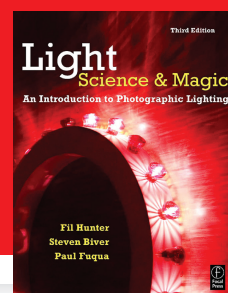


## Light has size

The size of the light source relative to your subject has great impact on the quality of the light and the 'feel' of your image. Light modifiers like umbrellas and softboxes create larger sources of illumination which in turn give softer, more flattering light. Whilst bare flashes are hard light sources in their own right, using grids (as in the image on the left) or snoots restricts the beam of light further, allowing for even more creative possibilities.

## Further resources

**Light Science and Magic: An Introduction to Photographic Lighting** by Fil Hunter, Paul Fuqua, Steven Biver – if there was one go-to textbook for understanding light, this would be it.  
**Speedlites Handbook: Learning to Craft Light with Canon Speedlites** by Syl Arena – primarily written for Canon shooters, this book has a lot to offer even if you don't shoot Canon. An in-depth resource for both speedlight beginners and advanced flash photographers, and a book I highly recommend.



## Light has colour

All photographers have an understanding of this – we compensate for it every time we adjust our camera's white balance. With OCF, specific colours are created using gels (coloured pieces of plastic) which are placed in front of the light source.

Colour can also be introduced when light reflects off a coloured surface, as in the water droplet on the right (light has been bounced off a blue card behind the droplet).

Colour itself is an incredibly important

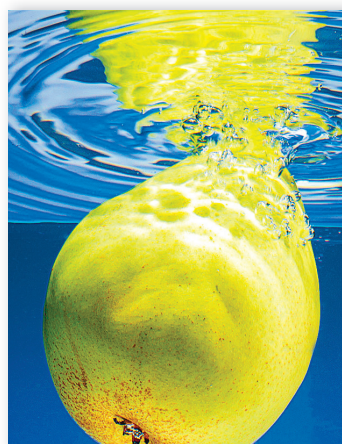
element in an image; aside from creating mood, the intelligent use of colour creates visual harmony in an image, which can turn a good image into a brilliant one. Colour theory is something most photographers know very little about – it's certainly not something I paid much attention to before I started learning to light.

The ability to use colour deliberately has greatly improved my own understanding of colour theory and improved my photography in a very dramatic way.



## Light creates shadow

This is an often forgotten fact. In the words of Joe McNally, 'If you want to make something more interesting, don't light all of it'. What mood would you assign to this image? Consider how shadow, colour, light position, light size and image composition have been used to achieve this.



## Light reflects off the surface of what it hits

This is what makes vision possible. Different surfaces reflect light differently and understanding this opens up a whole new range of visual possibilities.

## Light can freeze time

At low power, speedlights emit light for a very brief fraction of time. Using them in very low ambient light conditions will effectively mean that whatever is illuminated in that fraction of time will become the image that the camera's sensor records.



## Light behaves differently on different surfaces

Notice the difference in the reflections off the metal, fabric and the polished leather of the chest armour.

## Win a day of flash photography tuition

Firefly Photography has very kindly reserved a spot at one of this year's Flash Workshops (a value of \$180) for one lucky *D-Photo* reader. For your chance to win email [ahatwell@parksid.co.nz](mailto:ahatwell@parksid.co.nz) with the subject 'D-Light' and tell us what aspect of lighting you would like to see Rory cover next.

As these images have shown, light does far more than just allow us to see what we're looking at. Learning to light is a gradual process, which started for me when I acquired the ability to manipulate light

and start experimenting. Off-camera flash was the tool that made this possible, and I teach it because it opens the doors for photographers to work with, and ultimately understand, light.